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Rosalind Sibielski

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Reviving Cinderella: Contested Feminism and Conflicting Models of Female Empowerment in 21st-Century Film and Television Adaptations of "Cinderella"

Rosalind Sibielski

The 1998 film *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (Dir. Andy Tennant) opens with a scene in which the brothers Grimm are summoned to the residence of a French noblewoman who wishes to correct their telling of the story of "the little cinder girl" in their collection of folktales. The woman is revealed to be the descendant of Danielle De Barbarac, a fictional figure who, it is claimed within the film, is the inspiration for the "Cinderella" narrative. The remainder of the movie, presented as a recounting of Danielle's life, purports to represent the story of "Cinderella" as it actually occurred, and not as it is reported in the fairy tale. However, while *Ever After* is framed as both a retelling of "Cinderella" and—within the context of its premise of Cinderella as a pseudo-historical figure—a "setting straight" of the record concerning that story, the version provided by the film does not deviate very far from either the Grimm version or the Charles Perrault version that has assumed the status of the canonical "Cinderella" text within American culture.[1] In fact, the only significant variation between this account of "Cinderella" and its numerous predecessors derived from Western European *contes de fées* is its characterization of the protagonist, which is also presumably the aspect of the Grimm version that the woman in the opening scene takes issue with.

Unlike Cinderella in the Grimm version, who is described as "devout and good," and who patiently bears the abuse of her stepmother and stepsisters without complaint, Danielle is far from docile or obedient.[2] Instead, she is strong-willed and fiercely independent, talking back to her stepmother, standing up for herself, and disobeying orders that go against her principles, even if it means risking punishment for her insubordination. This transformation of Cinderella from paragon of patriarchal feminine virtue to unruly female rebel can be read within the context of the infiltration of girl power discourse into American popular culture at the turn of the millennium, which ostensibly offered an alternative to hegemonic

Rosalind Sibielski is an Assistant Professor in the Film Studies program at Rhode Island College. Her work has appeared in *Feminist Media Studies*, *Rhizomes*, and *The Projector: A Journal on Film, Media, and Culture*, as well as the edited collections *Monster Culture in the Twenty-First Century* and *Cyberfeminism 2.0*. She is currently working on a book project examining 21st-century media adaptations of fairy tales.

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constructions of adolescent femininity by linking both girls' individual identities as girls and their social empowerment within patriarchy to their cultivation of toughness, self-confidence, and assertiveness. Girl power discourse both emerged from and engendered a slew of popular media representations of smart, sassy, self-reliant girls, among whom Danielle figures alongside the protagonists of *Mulan* (Dirs. Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, 1998), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB 1997–2001 and UPN 2001-2003), and *The Powerpuff Girls* (Cartoon Network, 1998–2009) as an early exemplar.

Indeed, Danielle is just one of several Cinderellas featured in girl power-inflected media texts over the past 21 years. These texts include original cinematic and televisual variants of the fairy tale such as *A Cinderella Story* (Dir. Mark Rosman, 2004), *Enchanted* (Dir. Kevin Lima, 2007), and the Cinderella-centric plot line in the seventh season of *Once Upon a Time* on ABC (2018). This content also encompasses revisionist reimaginings of extant "Cinderella" narratives such as The Disney Channel's 1997 production of *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* (Dir. Robert Iscove), the 2014 film version of Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* (Dir. Rob Marshall), the film adaptations of *The Princess Diaries* (Dir. Gary Marshall, 2001) and *Ella Enchanted* (Dir. Tommy O'Haver, 2004)— adaptations both based on popular young adult novels that retell the "Cinderella" story with a girl power twist—and Kenneth Branagh's 2015 live-action remake of Disney's animated *Cinderella* (Dirs. Clyde Geronimi, Wifred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske, 1950).

This study examines these revisionist, popular media versions of "Cinderella" in order to explore the ways in which they reshape the fairy tale in light of, and in reaction to, American cultural responses to late 20th and early 21st century feminist activism. Whereas the representation of "empowered" Cinderellas in these texts might be read as a reflection of the social and political impacts of second- and third-wave feminism, the texts themselves provide contradictory narratives of what it is and what it means to be an empowered woman—socially, individually, and sexually—at the turn of the 21st century that equally reflect the influence of the discourses of postfeminism, as well as the anti-feminist backlash fomented by religious and political conservatives in the era of the culture wars. These revisionist "Cinderella" texts self-reflexively invoke genre conventions linked to the ideological function of interpellating women into their "proper" places in the patriarchal social order ascribed to fairy tales by feminist critics, largely in order to position themselves as articulations of ostensibly alternative understandings of gender and (hetero)sexuality. However, these revisionist texts do so even as they also frequently use their departures from fairy tale conventions to mask their own ambivalence about—and in some cases,

containment of—the terms through which femininity is conceived and female power is exercised outside of patriarchal terms. Ultimately, then, this study traces the ways in which the "Cinderella" narrative figures in these texts as a site of ideological struggle over the forms that female empowerment can and does take. It also examines the various ways in which these revisionist versions of "Cinderella" deploy the fairy tale in order to interrogate the culturally contested role of feminism in women's empowerment, as well as both women's and men's "happily ever after" at the dawn of the 21st century.

Reclaiming "Cinderella"

If this boom in revisionist versions of "Cinderella" over the past two decades can be attributed to the impact of girl power discourse on American popular culture, it can also be understood as a byproduct of the renewed popularity of fairy tales more generally in America at the turn of the millennium. Indeed, it is part of a larger proliferation of popular media texts between 2000 and the present that reimagine canonical fairy tales, what Jack Zipes has dubbed a veritable "cultural tsunami" of fairy tale media production.[3] These revisionist versions include, in addition to the texts mentioned previously, in chronological order by year of release: the NBC miniseries *The Tenth Kingdom* (2000), The Disney Channel miniseries adaptation of Gregory Maguire's 1999 novel *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* (Dir. Gavin Miller, 2002), *Hoodwinked* (Dirs. Corey Edwards and Todd Edwards, 2005), *The Princess and the Frog* (Dirs. Ron Clements and John Musker, 2009), *Tangled* (Dirs. Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, 2010), *Red Riding Hood* (Dir. Catherine Hardwicke, 2011), *Beastly* (Dir. Daniel Barnz, 2011), the NBC TV series *Grimm* (2011–2017), the ABC TV series *Once Upon a Time* (2011–2018), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Dir. Rupert Sanders, 2012), *Mirror, Mirror* (Dir. Tarsem Singh, 2012), The CW TV series *Beauty and the Beast* (2012–2016), *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters* (Dir. Tommy Wirkola, 2013), *Jack the Giant Killer* (Dir. Mark Atkins, 2013), *Jack the Giant Slayer* (Dir. Bryan Singer, 2013), *Frozen* (Dirs. Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013), *Maleficent* (Dir. Robert Stromberg, 2014), *Beauty and the Beast* (Dir. Bill Condon, 2017), and *The Little Mermaid* (Dirs. Blake Harris and Chris Bouchard, 2018).

All of these media adaptions, like the "Cinderella" texts that are the primary focus of this study, were released by Hollywood studios or national broadcast and cable television (TV) networks. They are all explicit reworkings of canonical fairy tale stories rather than referential texts that contain allusions to fairy tale narratives but do not directly feature their characters and/or or reenact their plots (e.g. *Freeway* [Dir. Matthew Bright, 1996],

Hard Candy [Dir. David Slade, 2005], or *Breadcrumbs* [Dir. Mike Nichols, 2011]). They are also all revisionist versions of those fairy tales, rather than faithful retellings. Additionally, with the exception of *Hoodwinked*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen*, they are also all live-action films/TV series aimed at teen or adult audiences. This latter point is particularly significant.

In *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films*, Jack Zipes traces the history of cinematic adaptations of fairy tale narratives beginning with the silent film versions of fairy tales directed by early movie pioneer Georges Méliès. Although it is not remarked upon by Zipes, the history that he recounts suggests that, after the silent film era, live-action fairy tale films largely disappear from Hollywood cinema until their sudden—prolific—resurgence in the late 1990s. Indeed, with a few notable exceptions such as *The Princess Bride* (Dir. Rob Reiner, 1987) or *Shelley Duvall's Fairy Tale Theatre* (Showtime, 1982–1987), it would seem that, in American during the period between the early 1930s and the turn of the millennium, fairy tale narratives were mostly the province of animated films and, later, TV series aimed primarily at family audiences (i.e., young children and their parents). This pattern does not hold true across national cinemas or TV industries outside the United States, nor is it true to the same extent of independent film production within the United States, as Zipes' history also demonstrates.[4] It therefore makes the sudden uptick in the production of live-action fairy tale films and TV series by Hollywood studios and major American broadcast and cable TV networks in the early 21st century all the more remarkable from a media industries perspective.

In discussing the use of the live-action format in *Ever After*, Cristina Bacchilega and John Rieder suggest that "to reach adolescents, its target audience" the film "had to be 'realistic,' which meant not only using live action but also presenting more rounded characters than Disney's and not relying on the supernatural to produce the heroine's success."[5] Although they do not extend this analysis any further to consider how the increase in live-action fairy tale film production at the turn of the millennium inaugurated by *Ever After* might be related to an attempt to expand the target demographic for fairy tale films, it is arguably the expansion of media markets for such content that is the most significant development here. Implied in the claim by Bacchilega and Rieder is the idea that teen audiences demand both a different visual aesthetic and a different kind of narrative content than the animated films produced for younger audiences that had been the predominant form of fairy tale movie within the United States for much of the 20th century. To the extent that *Ever After* initiates a split in American film production of fairy tales in the early 21st century (replicated in both TV and digital media) in which live-action content is

largely produced to appeal to older audiences, while animated content continues to be largely produced for and marketed to children,[6] it therefore becomes possible to interpret the sudden surge in the production of live-action fairy tale films at the turn of the millennium as an attempt to revitalize the genre by tapping into new—or at the very least, traditionally ignored—audiences, and not just as evidence of a resurgence in the cultural popularity or appeal of fairy tale stories. (Indeed it is possible that the former may be a driving force behind the latter.)

At the same time, the advertising for all of these 21st-century popular media adaptations of "Cinderella" suggests that it is not "adolescents" in general, but rather adolescent girls in particular to whom they are primarily marketed (a distinction that Bacchilega and Rieder seem to implicitly acknowledge in their description of *Ever After*'s protagonist as a character whom "girls at the end of the 20th century will not dismiss as an outdated fantasy").[7] This too is part of a larger trend over the past two decades that may explain why so many of the "Cinderella" texts that are the subject of this study, as well as so many of the other recent fairy tale media texts mentioned earlier, are not just revisionist fairy tales, but rather revisionist fairy tales that feature "tough girl" princesses as either protagonists or love interests who shun the traditionally female gender/genre role of damsel in distress.

As suggested previously, this transformation of fairy tale princesses into warriors and adventurers who defy the restrictive and repressive codes of patriarchal femininity embodied by their textual predecessors can be attributed in part to both the predominance and the popularity of girl power media narratives at the turn of the millennium. In "The Shoe Still Fits: *Ever After* and the Pursuit of a Feminist Cinderella," Christy Williams characterizes girl power as a compromised version of feminism, what she terms a "more socially acceptable form of feminism," that "emphasiz[es] individual strength and independence while remaining sexually attractive over working toward social or systemic change."[8] Williams further argues that, because of the film's embrace of this "popularized, restricted, and simplified version of feminism,"[9] neither it nor its protagonist can be considered to constitute more than a failed attempt at providing audiences with a feminist Cinderella. Williams is not alone in seeing girl power rhetoric as seeking to either commodify or undermine feminist goals and political projects,[10] nor is she the only scholar to find popular media texts that promote girl power to be problematic from a feminist perspective. Indeed, they often are, and I fully agree with Williams on this point. However, I would like to suggest that girl power was never a feminist philosophy, compromised or not. Nor has it ever been a political project—feminist or otherwise—concerned with bringing about social changes that contribute to

the empowerment of girls/women, except perhaps indirectly, by providing them with purportedly inspirational media role models. This context is why, unlike the many, varied, forms of feminism that have developed in the United States between the 19th century and the present, girl power does not have a cultural presence independent from or outside of the popular music, films, and TV series in which it is primarily articulated and through which it mostly circulates.

Instead, it is perhaps more accurate to see girl power as a 21st-century popular media genre that explores issues of female empowerment as a primary narrative and thematic concern, and in which such empowerment is only ever implicitly—and quite often uneasily—linked to feminism, if it is linked to feminism at all. Thus, while I agree with Williams that *Ever After* invokes girl power in its revision to both "Cinderella" the fairy tale and Cinderella the fairy tale character, I would suggest that, in doing so, it is not actually a "feminist" Cinderella that the film either claims or attempts to provide to viewers, but rather an empowered Cinderella. This point I will return to later on because it is precisely the highly contested relationship between feminism and female empowerment in 21st-century American culture that I interpret as one of the central thematic concerns taken up by *Ever After* and the other revisionist "Cinderella" media texts that are the focus of this study. For now, the point that I want to make is that the marked rise in the production of fairy tale media texts featuring "tough girl" princesses at turn of the millennium can be seen as an offshoot of a larger niche production strategy widely adopted by media conglomerates after the unprecedented box office success of *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), which was attributed in no small part to repeat viewings by adolescent female fans.

As Peggy Talley notes, this success transformed the (mostly white, middle-class) tween and teen girl audience demographics into a priority market for producers of both TV and film content, and girl power narratives have become one of the more lucrative means of tapping into those markets ever since.[11] Significantly, fairy tale adaptations have consistently proven to be an attractive property to both Hollywood studios and national TV networks in this regard, perhaps inspired by the popularity—and, more importantly for corporate media producers, the profitability—of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (Dirs. Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (Dirs. Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991), both of which revived The Walt Disney Company's lagging animation division by inserting "spunky" female protagonists into canonical fairy tale stories. After all, Kay Stone asserts that from the 20th century onwards "the fairy tale … becomes a female-oriented genre" within North America,[12] and this gendering of both the assumed audience and the assumed appeal of

fairy tale stories would seem to make fairy tales a particularly apt choice for media content aimed specifically at girls and women (especially as a counter-programming effort meant to balance out the superhero blockbusters and TV series that have become a staple of both film and TV production in recent years, and which are viewed by producers of both film and TV content as a primarily "male" genre). Regardless of the reason, however, it is noteworthy that fairy tale adaptations represent a considerable percentage of the films and TV shows released over the past two decades that deploy girl power narratives in order to appeal specifically to the female segment of the 12- to 24-year-old audience demographic—regardless of the actual demographic breakdowns of the audiences and fans of these fairy tale films and TV series.

At the same time, Jack Zipes attributes the resurgence of fairy tale narratives within American popular culture more generally at the turn of the millennium to their "appeal to our craving for regularity and security in our lives," an appeal that perhaps takes on an added resonance in the post-9/11 era.[13] Maria Tatar similarly suggests that,

> we may be giving these stories more air time … in part because we need their power surges now more than ever. The mythical always stages a comeback in times of high anxiety about technology and the atrophy of our affective life.[14]

I would like to suggest that, aside from the marketing concerns driving their production, the 21st-century revisionist fairy tales mentioned above do indeed serve a similar cultural function to that ascribed to them by Zipes and Tatar, albeit towards a slightly different end.

It is possible to interpret these revisionist fairy tales that foreground stories of women's empowerment alongside stories of heterosexual romance as providing forms of escape from and comfort within an era of cultural clashes over which expressions of gender and sexuality are culturally validated. Like the conservative political platforms promoting the "return to family values" in the 1980s and those pledging to "make American great again" in the current moment, contemporary invocations of canonical fairy tale narratives evince nostalgia for and offer the promise of a return to a fictive "once upon a time" in which heterosexual privilege, male privilege, and the gender binary remain unchallenged. Concurrently, the revisionist reimaginings of those same tales mentioned herein simultaneously purport to reflect the values of an equally fictive present in which gender equality is not only presumed to be universally supported—at least when it comes to social equality between cis-gendered men and women whose gender presentation conforms to hegemonic norms—but has already been achieved, and in which sexist attitudes are no longer articulated as anything other than marks of villainy. As such, while I agree with Zipes that in the early 21st-century fairy tales are routinely deployed within popular media to

bring, "people together to share relevant stories that speak to common problems,"[15] I would suggest that, more often than not, the "common problems" that these media texts featuring empowered fairy tale princesses seek to address is the question of how women's empowerment is constituted and enacted in contemporary American society, as well as the role that feminism does or should play in such empowerment.

It is worth noting here that the cultural function of providing platforms to work through upheavals in understandings of gender and sexuality is not new to fairy tales, nor is it unique to those revisionist fairy tales of the 21st century. Lewis Seifert, Patricia Hannon, and Donald Haase have all made arguments for the ways in which 17th- and 18th-century *contes de fées* mobilized the fairy tale as "a genre with something to say about gender and sexuality," as well as one that routinely "experimented with constructions and reconstructions of the male and the female."[16] Haase likewise situates feminist debates over the cultural function of fairy tales in the 1970s within the "cultural turmoil brought about by the student movement, feminism, the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal."[17] At the center of this cultural reevaluation of fairy tales in the 1970s were two influential studies that ascribed contradictory ideological aims to the genre. In "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale," Marcia Liberman argued that fairy tales function as "training manuals" for hegemonic femininity that serve to inculcate readers into the patriarchal social order,[18] while in "Fairy Tale Liberation," Alison Lurie argued that fairy tales that feature women as either heroines or storytellers serve the more subversive function of promoting female empowerment, as well as "preparing [readers] for women's liberation."[19] Lurie's desire to reclaim fairy tales as stories of—and vehicles for—women's liberation is echoed by the revisionist fairy tales penned by feminist authors beginning in the 1970s, among which Anne Sexton's *Transformations*, Olga Broumas's *Beginning with O*, and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* figure as key works.

Cathy Lynn Preston ascribes a similar project of rewriting and reclaiming fairy tales as stories of women's liberation to *Ever After*, which she argues "attempt[s] to respond to the last thirty years of feminist critique of gender construction in respect to key, Western European, popularized versions of the fairy tale."[20] While Preston does not go so far as the review of the film she cites, which interprets the work as a retelling of the "Cinderella" story that "[gives] it an unmistakable feminist spin,"[21] Preston does make a case for the film realizing feminist author Jane Yolen's call for portrayals of Cinderella as a "shrewd and practical girl persevering and winning a share of the power."[22] This point would seem to situate the film, if not precisely within the tradition of feminist revisionist fairy tales, then parallel to it.

Yet neither *Ever After* nor any of the other revisionist "Cinderella" media texts that are the focus of this study explicitly identify themselves as feminist works, even if they are often interpreted as such by both audiences and reviewers. Nor would I argue that any of them constitute feminist appropriations of canonical fairy tales. However, to the extent that they all promote vaguely pro-girl/woman messages in an attempt to situate themselves as "modern" retellings of fairy tale stories, they do seem to acknowledge both the impact of feminist discourse on 21st-century cultural understandings of gender and sexuality and the feminist tradition extending into the present day of rewriting canonical fairy tales in order to challenge—and reshape—those understandings. Accordingly, much in the same way that Mary Pipher, in titling her bestselling self-help book *Reviving Ophelia*, invokes the character of a literary figure renowned for her victimization in order to reclaim her as a symbol of female self-actualization, these 21st-century pop culture revisions to canonical fairy tales attempt to "revive" the stories of famously victimized fairy tale princesses in order to (re)position them as stories of female empowerment, even if they do not necessarily conceive of such stories in feminist terms—and even if, as I will argue in following text in regard to these recent popular media versions of "Cinderella," they ultimately challenge the need to do so in the first place.[23]

(Re)Imagining an Empowered Cinderella

According to Zipes, "'Cinderella' is probably the most popular fairy tale in the world."[24] Given its widespread circulation and recognition within the United States, it is perhaps fitting that "Cinderella" should also be the story selected for the (to-date) largest number of 21st-century revisionist princess tales produced by Hollywood studios and national broadcast and cable TV networks. That these tales purport to reimagine canonical fairy tale narratives as stories of female empowerment in many ways makes this selection of Cinderella (both the character and the story) as a target for revision all the more logical since it has also been one of the fairy tales most frequently singled out in feminist critiques of the genre's reinforcement of women's subordination within patriarchy. This focus includes the story's location of women's cultural value in their heterosexual desirability, its affirmation of the notion that women's happiness is dependent upon and exclusively constituted through marriage to an idealized Prince Charming figure, and its valorization of submissiveness, passivity, and self-abnegation as feminine virtues.

It is perhaps not surprising then, that in retelling the story as a tale of Cinderella's empowerment, the revisionist versions that are the subject of

this study tie that empowerment specifically to Cinderella both claiming and asserting selfhood, as well as exercising self-determination. These stories follow two narrative patterns: they either attempt to rehabilitate the gender and sexual politics of the "Cinderella" tale by transposing post-Women's Liberation Movement social developments and attitudes onto fairy tale realms, or else they stage the tale in the real-world setting of the United States in the 21st-century in order to relocate both the character and the story to a realm in which it assumed that the work of the Women's Liberation Movement, now consigned to the "once upon a time" of the 1960s through the 1980s, has largely been accomplished. In both cases, these stories position self-determination as the key to women's individual empowerment, and they feature protagonists who model such empowerment through their portrayal as either assertive, outspoken women that defy cultural stereotypes of female passivity, or else as characters who develop into such women as the narratives progress.

Accordingly, in *Ever After,* Danielle single-handedly manages to derive enough income from the family estate to support her stepmother and stepsisters after her father's death, all the while wishing that her stepmother will succeed in marrying her eldest daughter to the prince so that Danielle can be left free to live on her own and run the estate without interference. In *Once Upon a Time*, Jacinda, who is transformed through a curse into a working-class, single mother with no memory of her identity as Cinderella, doggedly battles her wealthy stepmother for custody of her 10-year old daughter. In the film version of *Ella Enchanted,* Ella refuses to accept the curse of obedience placed on her as a child by her fairy godmother, setting off in adolescence on a quest to get it lifted, whereas in *A Cinderella Story,* Sam remains committed to her dream of attending Princeton in spite of her stepmother's discouragement, working the full-time schedule in the family diner that her stepmother demands she undertake in order to earn money for tuition.

Conversely, in the film version of *The Princess Diaries*, Mia must learn self-confidence, as well as how to assert her thoughts and opinions, before she can assume the throne, while in *Enchanted*, Giselle must learn independence—and un-learn her internalization of fairy tale models of femininity—in order to achieve her happily ever after. Finally, in The Disney Channel's production of *Roger's and Hammerstein's Cinderella*, Cinderella is advised by her fairy godmother than she can only navigate the path to happily ever after by learning to believe in herself, as well as by taking action on her own to pursue her dreams, because she is the only one who can realize those dreams.

In this way, while Cinderella's empowerment is linked in all of these texts to her exercise of self-determination, it is also linked to her

self-actualization. Indeed, while Zipes asserts that "Cinderella" in all its many incarnations is fundamentally a story of "the triumph of the underdog,"[25] these 21st-century popular media adaptations reimagine "Cinderella" as a story of self-reliance, with the protagonist "coming into her own" in ways that involve her both discovering herself and asserting her personhood. Thus, Mia, Giselle, and the protagonist of *Rogers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* achieve empowerment by learning to stand up for themselves, while Danielle, Sam, Jacinda, and Ella all achieve it by fighting back against and/or refusing to give in to those who seek to strip them of their autonomy. Several of these texts also feature instances of their protagonists speaking out against injustices perpetrated against others, thereby further linking their empowerment to their willingness to stand up for the rights of others, and not just in the face of infringements to their own individual personhood. Thus, in the film version of *Ella Enchanted*, Ella takes part in protests on behalf of the rights of giants and elves, while in *Ever After*, Danielle is a champion for the rights of the poor, as well as debtors sentenced to forced labor. Meanwhile, in the film version of *The Princess Diaries*, Mia ultimately decides to assume the throne because she believes the legislative power attendant to ruling Genovia will allow her to intervene in the social justice issues on behalf of which she campaigns throughout the film.

This narrative engagement in social activism contributes to the depiction of these Cinderellas as independent-minded—and, therefore, within the logic of the texts in which they appear, empowered—women. At the same time, on a meta-textual level, it also obliquely aligns them with leftist social causes frequently associated with feminism in popular discourse, thereby hinting that these characters might be, if not feminist-identified, then at least feminist-aligned. Indeed, in tying their empowerment to civic engagement within the public sphere, these texts seem to gesture towards feminist calls for the greater participation of women within the public sphere. Yet equally noteworthy is that feminism is conspicuously absent from the social causes taken up by these Cinderellas, nor is institutionalized oppression based on either biological sex or performances of gender outside the gender binary among the injustices that they campaign against.

Instead, all of these stories are set in worlds in which everyone is cisgendered and conforms to hegemonic gender norms in their gender expression, and in which discrimination on the basis of being a woman/female-identified is not one of the oppressions that Cinderella must liberate herself from in order to achieve her happily ever after. While the former rhetorical move serves to exclude transgender, genderqueer, and non-binary individuals from these diegetic worlds (thereby foreclosing the possibility of deploying the stories of these defiant Cinderellas as stories about the

defiance of the gender binary),[26] the latter activates—or at the very least resonates with—what Angela McRobbie identifies as one of the hallmarks of postfeminist discourse, namely that it "positively draws on and invokes feminism" in order to "suggest that [gender] equality is achieved," and therefore that feminism is "no longer needed."[27]

At the same time, while the empowerment of Cinderella in all of these texts is linked to the efforts of their protagonists to take control of their lives and their destinies, the barriers that all of these women face in doing so are personal rather than institutional. Indeed, while all of these stories position themselves as stories of female empowerment, none of them explore the systemic limitations placed on women's agency under patriarchy. Williams notes that, in the case of *Ever After*, such a narrative position fails to engage in any in-depth "challenge [to] the underlying patriarchal structures of society," and thus to challenge patriarchy itself.[28] However, in reducing questions of women's disempowerment/empowerment to personal limitations that individual women ostensibly face when it comes to building lives on their own terms, these retellings of "Cinderella" also effectively divorce projects of women's empowerment from feminism by suggesting that realizing such empowerment is not a matter of social, political, legal, or economic change—for which participation in and support for a collectivist activist movement like feminism is necessary—but instead is accomplished once their protagonists realize, as Ella must in order to break her curse in *Ella Enchanted*, that the power to achieve happily ever after has been inside of them the whole time. This point may seem at first like a distinction without a difference because the end result—undermining feminist political projects through their stories—is the same. However, I would argue that the difference is actually quite important, since these popular media adaptations of "Cinderella" do not so much undermine feminism by reducing it to the level of the personal rather than the political as they undermine it by suggesting that feminism has no place in either women's empowerment or their happily ever after.

In this way, in confining their exploration of female empowerment to matters of inner resources and strength of character—and only to those things—these revisionist versions of "Cinderella" might be interpreted as severing feminism from any role in women's empowerment, rather than, as critics of these media texts have suggested, paying "lip service to feminism,"[29] "sell[ing] a watered-down version of feminism,"[30] or promoting a "faux feminism, in which fragments of feminist ideas are trivialized or subsumed within a dominant discourse of traditional gender roles."[31] At the same time, it is worth noting within this context that, in keeping with representational conventions characteristic of the girl power genre, several of these recent "Cinderella" media adaptations extend this theme of female

empowerment through self-reliance to encompass Cinderella conquering threats beyond just those romantic perils posed by scheming stepmothers or jealous stepsisters. This extension includes Ella fighting alongside Prince Char to fend off assassins dispatched by his uncle to kill him on his coronation day in *Ella Enchanted*, Giselle attempting to save Robert from both a dragon and a fall from the top of a skyscraper in *Enchanted*, and Danielle using her skills in swordsmanship to fight off the unwanted advances of the villainous M. Le Pieu in *Ever After*. It also includes the portrayal of Jacinda as one of the leaders of a rebel army seeking to overthrow the tyrannical royal family before the curse robs her of her identity in *Once Upon a Time*, as well as Cinderella playing a pivotal role in killing the giant in *Into the Woods*—in the process saving not just herself but the entire kingdom.

Significantly, while these displays of female agency might be read extratextually as a refusal of the cultural ideals of female submissiveness modeled by earlier Cinderellas, they can equally be read as both a refusal of the fairy tale tradition that reduces women to the narrative role of damsel in distress and the patriarchal discourses concerning sexual difference that such stories serve to reinforce. Then again, as Season 7 of *Once Upon a Time* progresses, Jacinda is increasingly sidelined from the narrative action and is ultimately relegated to the role of damsel in distress for the climactic battle that wraps up the season's narrative arc. Likewise, the protagonist in the 2015 Disney *Cinderella* insistently models a return to her passive predecessors, internalizing her mother's dying words to "have courage and be kind" to mean accepting the abuse of her stepmother and stepsisters without as much as a single protest and not taking action of any sort to fight back against their imprisonment of her in the attic when Prince Kit comes searching for her (and ultimately rescues her from them) at the climax of the film, so there is also more than a little inconsistency in this regard.

Williams sees this tendency in recent girl power-inflected princess stories to "empower a traditionally passive heroine" by subverting the fairy tale trope of the damsel in distress as a problematic representational convention that "merely confirms sexist stereotypical generalizations of the way fairy tale heroines are supposed to behave," since their protagonists are portrayed as an exception to fairy tale gender/genre conventions rather than a defiance of or a challenge to those conventions.[32] I would suggest that this representational convention is perhaps equally problematic because it ties female empowerment to a decidedly patriarchal understanding of the exercise of power based on dominance, force, and physical violence, not to mention the embodiment of the patriarchal ideal of the rugged individualist. At the same time, though, in discussing the narrative reversal of the damsel in distress trope in *Enchanted*, Bacchilega and Rieder take issue

with the fact that it is not Giselle, but rather her magical animal helper, Pip, who ultimately saves Robert, arguing that the film thus robs Giselle of even this suspect form of empowerment:

> So we can't even say that Giselle performs the heroic rescue expected of the Prince Charming stereotype. She is charming, and that's it … While becoming more three dimensional and making choices for herself, Giselle continues to be a cheerful and fashionable housecleaning helpmate whose actions never question the institution of marriage.[33]

It is interesting that while this critique begins with Pip supplanting Giselle as Robert's rescuer, the actual point of contention for Bacchilega and Rieder—and the thing that in their analysis ultimately disqualifies both *Enchanted* as a feminist fairy tale and Giselle's self-actualization within the film as a form of feminist empowerment—is the fact that Giselle "making choices for herself" does not include her choosing to reject marriage as part of her happily ever after. This position is echoed by Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse in their analysis of "patriarchal backlash" in the film.[34] While acknowledging that "as Giselle's struggles to become a three-dimensional character in the real world, she begins to think (however minimally) for the first time, questioning—if only in a superficial way—the narrowly defined script for her life in Andalasia,"[35] this move towards empowerment (regardless of how limited) is entirely cancelled out in their view by the fact that:

> Giselle's gradual movement towards self-realization (by beginning to think for herself, recognizing that she loves Robert rather than Prince Edward, assuming the role of warrior in her pursuit of the dragon, and starting her own business) is undermined by [a] narrative that ultimately defines her in relationship to a man.[36]

The fact that these revisionist "Cinderella" narratives do not dispense with the marriage plot at the center of the fairy tale is also a point of critique for John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, who express disappointment that Danielle's exercise of agency in *Ever After* shifts from work for "a more just society … to the schema of romantic love."[37] Similarly, Williams finds fault with the fact that the film ends with marriage between Danielle and Prince Henry, despite the fact that, in her view, the film suggests that "she would be fine if she did not marry the prince."[38]

All of these analyses assert a critical position in which Cinderella can find empowerment or she can find heterosexual romance, but she cannot find both. Indeed, the argument here seems to be that the latter precludes the former, as well as precludes assuming (or embracing) the label of "feminist" on the part of either these "Cinderella" texts or their protagonists. Significantly, it is precisely this stance that these adaptations of "Cinderella" themselves seem to be challenging in their attempts to rewrite the fairy tale's marriage plot. Far from uncritically replicating this aspect of

the fairy tale, these texts instead appear to try to rehabilitate the marriage plot by incorporating it into their larger explorations of female agency and female empowerment through self-determination. None of the Cinderellas in these revisionist popular media versions may "question the institution of marriage" as Bacchilega and Rieder would have it, but they do question the kinds of marriages/romantic partnerships that they want for themselves, as well as which models of heterosexual romance fit into their vision of happily ever after.[39] This questioning is admittedly still a very limited way of defining female empowerment, but it does appear to be one way in which the "Cinderella" texts that are the focus of this study seem to be both acknowledging and answering feminist critiques of the "Cinderella" tale such as those quoted above, while also questioning—not marriage itself—but rather why rejecting marriage needs must be a precondition of Cinderella's empowerment, as well as a necessary condition of imagining a feminist Cinderella.

Rewriting the Marriage Plot—and Happily Ever After—in "Cinderella"

Within this context, it is worth examining the ways in which the marriage plot figures into both the achievement of happily ever after and the exercise of self-determination for the ostensibly empowered Cinderellas who appear in these media adaptations. Only in *Into the Woods* does happily ever after for Cinderella involve walking away from marriage to Prince Charming. Likewise, *Into the Woods* is also the only one of the "Cinderella" media texts that are the focus of this study in which happily ever after for Cinderella possibly encompass a life without romantic attachments of any kind. (The film, like the stage play on which it is based, ends on a somewhat ambiguous note in which the prospect of a future romantic union between Cinderella and the character of The Baker, with whom she agrees to raise the story's three orphan children in the final scene, is neither conclusively discounted nor confirmed.) The rest preserve the inclusion of marriage to—or at least romantic union with—Prince Charming in the fairy tale's narrative resolution, but they attempt to rewrite that resolution so that heterosexual romance, while still featured, is de-centered. In this way, in keeping with their thematic emphasis on self-actualization and self-determination as the cornerstones of Cinderella's (and women's) empowerment, they also attempt to reimagine Cinderella's happily ever after in ways that accommodate both a relationship with Prince Charming and a life outside of that relationship.

Thus, the film version of *The Princess Diaries* concludes with Mia and Michael opting for a long-distance romance so that she can focus on governing Genovia, and *A Cinderella Story* ends with Sam cautioning viewers

that, although she and Austin are committed to living "happily ever after" with one another, it is only "for now" because she is a freshman in college and her desires may very well change in the future. Conversely, the companionate marriages between Danielle and Henry in *Ever After* and Ella and Char in *Ella Enchanted* presumably facilitate a happily ever after in which Cinderella's story does not culminate in marriage to Prince Charming, but instead continues on into a new chapter in which she rules over the kingdom alongside him. This invocation of what might be characterized (after Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book[40]) as the "lean in" model of feminism, in which empowerment for women is measured in terms of their ability to balance both fulfilling marriages and fulfilling occupation outside of marriage, also manifests in a different way in both *Enchanted* and *Once Upon a Time*, in which happily ever after for Giselle and Jacinda encompass both career success and successful family lives. As such, while Pershing and Gablehouse read *Enchanted* as another in a long line of fairy tale narratives that "equate the heroine's fulfilment with heterosexual romance and marriage,"[41] all of these versions of "Cinderella" actually seem to be trying to counter this narrative tradition by presenting stories in which romance/marriage is only one component of what makes their protagonists' lives fulfilling. More importantly, though, they also seem to be equally attempting to counter arguments that women can only achieve empowerment—or be considered to be empowered—if they forsake the pursuit of heterosexual romance, that marriage has no place in either feminism or women's empowerment, and that neither marriage nor heterosexual romance can ever be part of what makes women's lives fulfilling—and thus what constitutes either an empowered woman's or a feminist woman's happily ever after.

In this way, these stories arguably attempt to rewrite the marriage plot within "Cinderella"—as well as to reimagine the terms of the marriage between Cinderella and Prince Charming—not just to rehabilitate the fairy tale, but also to (re)negotiate the contested role of marriage within American feminism, as well as the contested roles of both marriage and feminism in women's "happily ever after" within 21st-century American culture. Feminist critiques of the marriage plot in the "Cinderella" tale hinge on its ideological function in affirming patriarchal conceptions of marriage, in which women have an unequal and subordinate status. This critique is echoed in the analyses of *Ever After* and *Enchanted* quoted previously, which seem to draw on second wave feminist discourses that position marriage solely as an oppressive institution, and that see marriage in toto, rather than just patriarchal models of marriage, as a contributor to women's disempowerment. The "marriage of equals" model of heterosexual romantic union featured in these other "Cinderella" texts might therefore

be interpreted less as a restoration of the marriage plot, and more as a reformation of that plot, in which marriage is envisioned along more egalitarian—if not precisely more feminist—lines (although still along entirely heteronormative ones).

In this way, while Preston sees *Ever After*'s "attempt to retrieve the romantic possibility of 'true love' for the generation currently being raised in the aftermath/afterglow of second-wave feminist and post-Marxist critique" as a point of feminist criticism,[42] and Pershing and Gablehouse condemn *Enchanted* for "incorporate[ing] moderately feminist elements" only in order to "compress" the actions of female characters into the conventions of popular romance while maintaining that they are her choice, not actions instilled by patriarchal teachings and values,"[43] all of these popular media adaptations of "Cinderella" might instead be interpreted as trying to negotiate an ideological landscape in which heterosexual romance can only ever function as a tool of patriarchal oppression. In the process, they also seem to be attempting to strike a balance between—or perhaps carve out a place for—both female empowerment and heterosexual romantic partnerships in 21st-century women's happily ever after. Indeed, in trying to reclaim both fairy tales and the fantasy of fairy tale romance as empowering for women, these versions of "Cinderella" might be read as participating in what Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards have described as third wave feminist efforts to "reclaim tabooed symbols of women's enculturation as something other than booby traps set by the patriarchy."[44] That marriage/heterosexual romance is the focus of this effort, as well as the focus of a large number of critiques of these "Cinderella" tales as either pseudo-feminist or anti-feminist, is significant. It suggests, as Patricia Sawin has pointed out within another context, that however much feminism, fairy tales, and feminist evaluations of fairy tales have evolved since the 1970s, the debate initiated by Lurie and Lieberman over the feminist uses of fairy tales—both of whom, I would add, in different ways positioned the incorporation of the marriage plot within fairy tales featuring female protagonists as the litmus test for their ideological underpinnings—is still very much alive in the present day.[45]

At the same time, to the extent that her portrayal as an empowered woman factors into Cinderella's happily ever after in these texts, it also factors into Prince Charming's as well, as romantic partnerships with empowered women benefit the prince figures both personally and professionally across a large number of these stories. While all of them are portrayed as being personally fulfilled in their equitable romantic partnerships with Cinderella, in both *Ever After* and *Ella Enchanted*, Henry and Char are additionally portrayed as becoming both better men and better rulers as a result of those partnerships. Likewise, in *A Cinderella Story*, Sam's

commitment to staying true to herself inspires Austin to stand up to his father and to refuse to agree with his father's plans for Austin's future. In this way, not only does female empowerment factor into both women's and men's happily ever after in all of these stories (at least to the extent that both women and men benefit from it), but, in taking this position, the stories themselves can be interpreted as simultaneously refuting both feminist discourses that see women's empowerment and the institution of marriage as incompatible *and* anti-feminist discourses that maintain that feminism does not benefit men, as well as that women's social, economic, and/or political empowerment has resulted in men's disempowerment.

Given the extent to which Cinderella's empowerment is tied to her exercise of self-determination in these texts, it is significant that they also rewrite the marriage plot in order to foreground both marriage on her own terms and to a man of her own choosing. In this way, the marriage plot within the fairy tale shifts from a signifier of women's oppression under patriarchy to a signifier of women's empowerment. This shift is facilitated in no small part, however, because of the concomitant portrayal of the Prince Charming figure as the man of Cinderella's choosing precisely because he both respects and supports her autonomy. In discussing CBS's 1957 TV production of *Rogers and Hammerstein's Cinderella*, Zipes observes that it initiates a revision in which Prince Charming is depicted as "much more democratic" than in previous versions of the fairy tale, a representational convention that he asserts has continued on into the present day.[46] It is unclear what Zipes means by "more democratic" since he does not expand on this point any further, but in all of the recent media adaptations of "Cinderella" that are the focus of the study it seems to translate into a Prince Charming who is a proponent of gender equality, even if—much like the Cinderellas featured in these texts—he is not an avowed feminist.

Accordingly, Giselle chooses Robert over Edward in *Enchanted* because he encourages her self-sufficiency, as well as her romantic and sexual autonomy. Similarly, Henry proves to be a good match for Jacinda in *Once Upon a Time* because he both respects and values her independence, as well as her toughness. In *Ella Enchanted*, Ella finds herself drawn to Char because he makes clear that he will not make any demands on her even before he knows about the terms of the curse that forces her to bend to the will of those who command her obedience, while in *Rogers and Hammerstein's Cinderella*, Prince Christopher wins over Cinderella by assuring her that what he is seeking in a wife is not "a devoted servant," bur rather "someone I can really talk to."

The Cinderellas in *Ever After*, *The Princess Diaries*, *A Cinderella Story*, and Disney's 2015 *Cinderella* are additionally raised by fathers who likewise

nurture their independence, and who, in *The Princess Diaries* and *A Cinderella Story*, also assume the narrative role traditionally filled by either the fairy godmother or the ghost of Cinderella's mother, in that it is their words of encouragement from beyond the grave that inspire Cinderella to finally liberate herself from her abusive home life. In the case of *Ever After*, Williams argues that this undermines the film's reimagining of "Cinderella" in feminist terms, since Danielle's "independence and self-reliance become possible because of the liberal, sensitive, forward-thinking men who *allow* her to step outside of gender boundaries, not because she has fought for and won equality."[47] However, such a reading of the film conflates men's support for women's projects of empowerment with men's exercise of control over women's empowerment and suggests that supporting Cinderella in her self-sufficiency is the same thing as granting her self-sufficiency.

Significantly, both the Prince Charmings who court these Cinderellas and the fathers who raise them may indeed be portrayed as "liberal, sensitive, [and] forward-thinking" in these media texts, but in this portrayal they are presented as allies to the Cinderella characters, not as the gatekeepers to or the orchestrators of either their self-actualization or their empowerment. At the same time, while they do not make speeches in support of dismantling of the patriarchy or take part in political work to such ends, they do view women as autonomous beings and they do not embody popular media models of toxic masculinity—which is about as "feminist" a gesture as one can expect from Hollywood films or TV programming airing in primetime on either The Disney Channel or ABC. Granted, this allowance is a disappointingly low bar when it comes to measuring the progressiveness of either the texts or their male characters, and on this point I am in agreement with Williams.[48] However, rather than "reinforce[ing] male authority and remov[ing] the main locus of female power from the story entirely,"[49] I would suggest that, in the same way that these stories appear to reevaluate the marriage plot in "Cinderella" in order to reclaim marriage as something other than a tool of Cinderella's/women's oppression, they can also be read as attempting to reclaim the institution of fatherhood as something other than an extension of patriarchy—although such an interpretation largely depends on whether one reads the transformation of stories of the affective bonds between mothers and daughters into stories of such bonds between fathers and daughters as a progressive or a regressive move.

At the same time, to the extent to which the freedom to both choose one's spouse and dictate the terms of one's romantic relationships functions in these texts as a signifier of Cinderella's empowerment, it is also worth noting the ways in which several of them additionally rewrite the marriage plot so that it is Prince Charming, rather than Cinderella, who is portrayed

as disempowered by the practice of the marriage ball. Central to feminist critiques of "Cinderella" has also been the function of the marriage ball as a kind of marriage market where the prince chooses a wife from among his subjects without regard for her wishes or consent. This critique is taken up but reversed in *Rogers and Hammerstein's Cinderella*, *Ever After*, and Disney's 2015 *Cinderella*, so that it is Prince Charming who is robbed of his agency through the practice of the marriage ball. In these versions it is he who is forced to marry against his will and to a mate not of his choosing, and it is he who is reduced to an object of fantasy and desire by the women attending the ball (a theme also echoed in Char's depiction as a celebrity heartthrob in the film version of *Ella Enchanted*). This particular rewriting of the marriage plot results in contradictory messages. On the one hand, it accomplishes a transformation of the story in which both the marriage ball and the resulting marriage between Cinderella and Prince Charming are scrubbed of troubling associations with the denial of women's agency under patriarchy. On the other hand, in making Prince Charming the victim of patriarchal tradition, it simultaneously activates (anti-feminist) Men's Rights Movement discourses that maintain that it is men who are the true victims of gender inequality.

Additionally, while the emphasis on women's empowerment through the exercise of self-determination in all of these texts might be interpreted as a feminist-inspired take on Kay Stone's assertion that "the 'happily ever after' meaning of fairy tales [is] not about finding one's prince or princess, but about finding oneself,"[50] the fact that these Cinderellas exercise self-determination primarily in terms of to whom and under what circumstances they will marry can just as easily be read as endorsing what Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra identify as the postfeminist conception of women's empowerment that sees it in terms of "freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting"[51] and nothing else. In this sense, Bacchilega and Rieder, Pershing and Gablehouse, Stephens and McCallum, and Williams are all correct that these popular media versions of "Cinderella" can also be interpreted as rewriting both the marriage plot and its role in Cinderella's *happily ever after* to remove questions of women's equality from the social and political realms and to limit it to the domestic sphere, while at the same time suggesting that because 21st-century women supposedly have greater choices in terms of what kinds of romantic and sexual partnerships they will enter into, and/or because they have ostensibly achieved greater equality in those partnerships, they have achieved other forms of equality as well.[52]

It is also worth noting here that while these revisionist versions of "Cinderella" may reimagine the fairy tale as a story of women's empowerment, that empowerment is not open to all women in these stories. Indeed,

while these versions may revise much about what the Perrault and Grimm versions have to say about femininity, most still follow the tradition that sees "Cinderella" exclusively as a tale of white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class femininity.[53] Thus, in the same way that this cycle of "tough girl" Cinderella media narratives include no transgender, genderqueer, or non-binary Cinderellas, they also do not include any lesbian Cinderellas, nor have popular literary works such as Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Shoe" or Malinda Lo's *Ash*, both of which transform the marriage plot in "Cinderella" in order to focus on same-sex romance, so far been among the "Cinderella" stories chosen for adaptation by Hollywood studios, national TV networks, or prominent streaming services such as Netflix.[54] Nor are there any recent popular media versions of the fairy tale in which Cinderella is disabled. The closest is the portrayal of her eldest stepsister in The Disney Channel adaptation of Gregory Maguire's *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, which significantly alters both the extent and the narrative prominence of her disability in comparison to the novel.

Similarly, although Cinderella is portrayed as an African-American woman in The Disney Channel version of *Rogers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* and a Latinix woman in *Once Upon a Time*, the efforts of either to position the fairy tale as a "universal" story through inclusive depictions of Cinderella as a woman of color cut both ways. It simultaneously opens up the fairy tale's narrative to encompass women of color and ignores/represses any consideration of the ways in which intersections between race and gender factor into women's lived experiences as women, as well as the forms that both oppression and empowerment take for them. In this way, while these versions of "Cinderella" feature women of color as protagonists, they are not stories of women of color. Ultimately, then, while the popular media versions of "Cinderella" analyzed above appear to subscribe to post-feminist conceptualizations of women's empowerment as the exercise of individual choice when it comes to marriage, career, and/or lifestyle, they seem to equally embrace a specifically neoliberal brand of feminism that sees gender as a universal—and universalizing—category in which whiteness, cis-gendering, heterosexuality, ableism, and middle-class values/experiences provide the defaults through which femininity is defined.

A Cinderella for—and of—the 21st-Century

In their introduction to *Cinderella Across Cultures*, Marine Hennard Dutheil De La Rocère, Gillian Lathey, and Monika Woźniak suggest that, as the fairy tale has circulated across both cultures and generations, it has "multiplied to carry radically different messages and to serve competing interests and values."[55] Although they are talking about "competing

interests and values" promoted between different "Cinderella" texts, what I find both remarkable and significant about the popular media adaptations of the fairy tale that are the subject of this study is that they manifest these different, often competing, ideological positions within the same texts—embracing second wave, third wave, and neoliberal feminist stances, as well as postfeminist and anti-feminist stances, all within the same narrative rather than across different versions of the "Cinderella" story. The conflicting, and at times contradictory, conceptualizations of both feminism and female empowerment that they endorse as a result might be understood as a marketing strategy aimed at appealing to audiences on all sides of the contemporary culture wars, in that it makes it possible to variously (and simultaneously) read each of these texts as "Cinderella" tales that implicitly celebrate feminist projects of women's empowerment, as postfeminist or antifeminist deployments of "Cinderella" aimed at rejecting the role of feminism in both women's empowerment and their happily ever after, or as a-political modernizations of the fairy tale that simply use it to celebrate women and their stories—the ones they live, the ones they figure in, and (as fairy tales are presumed to be) the ones that they enjoy. It all depends on the political orientation of those watching these films and TV shows and what they want to get out of them.

This approach would seem to go a long way towards explaining how the exact same texts can be both celebrated as feminist takes on the "Cinderella" story and condemned as either postfeminist or anti-feminist versions of "Cinderella"[56] even as the texts themselves are very careful to claim only to provide audiences with stories of an empowered Cinderella, and not a feminist one. It may also explain why, in spite of this distancing from any overt feminist identification, all of these texts stop short of actively discouraging readings of their protagonists as feminists—and even arguably invite such readings through their on-screen representation, however coded. In the process of doing so, these texts also foreground the ways in which girl power—understood as either a media genre or a media marketing hook—plays on cultural ambivalences towards feminism, while also simultaneously tapping into the cultural appeal of stories of female empowerment among the 21st-century American girls and women who are the target audiences for these fairy tale adaptations. As Kim Snowden has suggested, "mainstream films using fairy tale motifs and stories and marketed towards a teenaged and early-twenties female audience" that "appear to draw on feminist ideals" but that "ultimately prioritize romantic, heterosexual love and standard norms of beauty as the most prized achievements their characters—and by extension, their audiences—can hope for" have proven to be the stories of female empowerment that such audiences appear to be "the most

comfortable with."[57] The popularity of the films and TV shows that are the focus of this study would seem to bear that out.

Yet the ambivalence that Snowden describes is not generational—or at least not only generational. It is, in fact, reflective of the conflicting—and conflicted—attitudes that surround feminism in 21st-century American culture more generally. Thus, as I have tried to demonstrate in my analysis, in foregrounding questions of what counts as feminism, what counts as female empowerment, the role that feminism does or should play in women's empowerment, and the place of marriage/heterosexual romance within both feminism and female empowerment, these revisionist versions of "Cinderella" are symptomatic of the highly contested views of—and value placed on—feminism in the United States in the 21st century. Ultimately, then, if these girl power "Cinderella" texts attempt to update the fairy tale for contemporary audiences by reimagining it as a story of female empowerment, it is the ambivalence that these stories demonstrate when it comes to the role of feminism in that empowerment—as well as in both women's and men's "happily ever after"—that truly makes these versions of "Cinderella" fairy tales of and for the 21st century.

Notes

1. Grimm and Grimm, "Cinderella," in *Grimms' Fairy Tales*; Perrault, *Cinderella: A Fairy Tale*.
2. Grimm, Cinderella, p. 153.
3. Zipes, "The Great Cultural Tsunami of Fairy Tale Films," in *Fairy Tale Films Beyond Disney: International Perspectives*, p. 1.
4. Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy Tale Films*.
5. Bacchilega and Rieder, "Mixing It Up: Generic Complexity and Gender Ideology in Early Twenty-First Century Fairy Tale Films," in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, p. 23.
6. Although animated fairy tale content is not produced exclusively for children, as evidenced by Netflix's 2018 streaming series *Disenchantment*, created by Matt Groening, who also crated *The Simpsons*, which incidentally also features an unconventional fairy tale princess as its protagonist.
7. Bacchilega, Mixing It Up, p. 23.
8. Williams, "The Shoe Still Fits: *Ever After* and the Pursuit of a Feminist Cinderella," in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, p. 109.
9. Ibid., p. 114.
10. See, for example, Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural History*; Whelehan, *Overloaded: Popular Culture, Feminism, and the Future*; Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, and *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power, and Social Change*.
11. Tally, *Re-Imagining Girlhood: Hollywood and the Tween Girl Film Market*.
12. Stone, "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us," in *Some Day Your Witch Will Come*, p. 16.

13. Zipes, "Forward," in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, p. xii.
14. Tatar quoted in Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder*, p. 75.
15. Zipes, Cultural Tsunami, p. 6.
16. Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France, 1690–1715*; Hannon, *Fabulous Identities: Women's Fairy Tales in Seventeenth Century France;* Haase, "Preface," in *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, pp. vii–viii.
17. Haase, "Forward," in *Some Day Your Witch Will Come*, p. ix.
18. Lieberman, "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale," in *College English*, p. 385.
19. Lurie, "Fairy Tale Liberation," in *New York Review of Books*, p. 42.
20. Preston, "Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: Postmodernism and the Fairy Tale," in *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, p. 203.
21. Rozen, quoted in Preston, Disrupting, p. 203.
22. Yolen, quoted in Preston, Disrupting, p. 204.
23. Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls.*
24. Zipes, Enchanted Screen, p. 172.
25. Ibid.
26. Unlike recent revisionist versions of "Cinderella" in popular literature such as *Cinder Ella* by S.T. Lynn (2016), or the Turkish anthology film *Anlat Istanbul* (Dirs. Ömür Atay, Selim Demirdelen, Kudret Sabanci, Yücel Yolcu, and Ümit Ünal, 2005), both of which feature transgender Cinderellas.
27. McRobbie, "Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power and Identity*, p. 28.
28. Williams, Shoe Still Fits, p. 101.
29. Ibid., p. 109.
30. Bacchilega, Mixing It Up, p. 30.
31. Pershing and Gablehouse, "Disney's *Enchanted*: Patriarchal Backlash and Nostalgia in a Fairy Tale Film" in Early Twenty-First Century Fairy Tale Films," in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, p. 154.
32. Williams, Shoe Still Fits, p. 109–110.
33. Bacchilega, Mixing It Up, p. 29.
34. Pershing, Disney's Enchanted, p. 137.
35. Ibid., p. 151.
36. Ibid., p. 154.
37. Stephens and McCallum, "Utopia, Dystopia, and Cultural Controversy in *Ever After* and *The Grimm Brother's Snow White*," in Marvels and Tales, p. 208.
38. Williams, Shoe Still Fits, p. 115.
39. Bacchilega, Mixing It Up.
40. Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead.*
41. Pershing, Disney's Enchanted, p. 153.
42. Preston, Disrupting, p. 200.
43. Pershing, Disney's Enchanted, p. 153.
44. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future*, p. 136.
45. Sawin, "Things Walt Disney Didn't Tell Us (But at Which Rogers and Hammerstein at Least Hinted): The 1965 Made-for-TV Musical of Cinderella," in *Channeling Wonder*, p. 118.
46. Zipes, Enchanted Screen, p. 181.
47. Williams, Shoe Still Fits, p. 114, original emphasis.

48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., p. 113.
50. Stone, "Fairy Tales for Adults: Walt Disney's Americanization of the *Märchen*," in *Some Day Your Witch Will Come*, p. 25.
51. Tasker and Negra, "Introduction," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture,* p. 2.
52. Bacchilega, Mixing It Up; Pershing, Disney's Enchanted; Stephens and McCallum, Utopia; Williams, Shoe Still Fits.
53. Grimm, Cinderella.
54. Donoghue, "The Tale of the Shoe," in *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*; Lo, *Ash*.
55. De La Rochère, Lathey, and Woźiak, "Introduction," in *Cinderella Across Cultures: New Directions and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, p. 1.
56. For a discussion of the positive reception of *Ever After* as a feminist text, see Williams (Shoe Still Fits), and for a discussion of the positive reception of *Enchanted* as a feminist text see Pershing and Gablehouse, Disney's Enchanted, p. 140).
57. Snowdon, "Fairy Tale Film in the Classroom: Feminist Cultural Pedagogy, Angela Carter, and Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves,*" in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, p. 161.

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